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in French can be political

Besides struggling to make their mark as artists, our performers over the years have also been preoccupied with bearing a torch for Quebec culture and lighting a fire here and around the musical world

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This put them at odds with the Société St. Jean Baptiste, which left them out of the official June 24 celebrations this year. So they joined with Loco Locass, Monsieur Serge, the apolitical but immensely popular Dumas, Les Zapartistes and others to organize a "political" St. Jean at Jean Drapeau Park, drawing 30,000 paying fans.

Pauzé says his generation has been falsely characterized as "a little boring – at their computers, playing video games."

In reality, "They're way more focused on the world around them than 10, 15 years ago."

It's the communication generation: The Internet has been a boon for Quebec music and political banter alike.

New pride in Québécois groups is evidenced by a plethora of T-shirts and rags for Les Cowboys, Les Breastfeeders, Les Trois Accords, Mes Aïeux, Les Chiens, Le Nombre et al., replacing R.E.M. and Pearl Jam. Says Pauzé: "This is all good for building a society in Quebec."

Thomas Hellman is a non-political singer who hollers French lyrics to an American folk-rock beat he says could only come from Quebec. He was born in Quebec to a mother from Provence, in southern France, and a father from Munster, Tex., near Dallas. His second album, L'Appartement, has received raves locally and, he says, the nationalist question "has popped up a lot with me."

"It's because I'm so in the middle of everything. I'm as much in the anglophone scene as the francophone. I don't see the differences or miscommunication between the two. Of course, I'm extremely attached to Quebec, but I don't consider myself a political person.

"Strangely enough, the very fact that I'm doing what I'm doing here in Quebec has a political dimension to it. I'm part of a new generation of Quebecers and Canadians for whom the questions of nationhood are posed a different way, because our sense of identity and belonging is not as easily defined as it may have been in the '60s or '70s. It's not English vs. French, but a sense of identity based on a mix of languages and cultures not only played out here but globally."

Chafik of les Locos, who enjoys everyone from DJ Shadow to Le Peuple de l'Herbe from Lyon, adds: "The more you're exposed to what people are doing elsewhere, the more you want to be part of the game.

"What's interesting is seeing the differences between the Chinese, the Irish, the Mexican. I want to be part of this difference, too. We remain Québécois, but we're connected with the rest of the world, and find that many people have the same desires we do. That's reassuring because independentistes are often portrayed as navel-gazers, racists, extremists, whatever."

Although les Locos have organized benefits against anti-Semitism and racism, they felt compelled to come up with a song like La Censure pour l'échafaud to repel charges of racism levelled at nationalists.

"Charges of racism are a weapon they use to try to make independantistes feel guilty," says Biz. "Listen, you can disagree with our project to the max, but don't call us racists."

Loco Locass is "as much an artistic trip as it is a political one. We put all our heart and pride in who we are, so we wanted Amour Oral to be very good musically. We want the best rap in French, we want the best in music."

Like les Locos, Charlebois agrees that "singing in French in North America, no matter what message or genre, hip-hop to punk-trash, is already an engagement. In Europe, it's very tempting for a young French person to sing in English. The language of Europe is English, not French."

"Language reflects a perspective," says Batlam. "We have a francophone perspective in an anglophone North America. It's unique, it's different and – mon dieu – we need difference in a world monopolized by the Anglo-Saxon view."

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PHOTOS: FROM GAZETTE FILES

Loco Locass: Biz (left), Batlam and Chafik.

Félix Leclerc

La Bolduc

Les Cowboys Fringants: fiddler Marie-Annick Lepine (rear), guitarist Jean-François Pauzé, singer Karl Tremblay.

Robert Charlebois

Les Colocs: André Vanderbiest, André Fortin, Mike Sawatsky.

Pauline Julien

Beau Dommage: Marie-Michèle Desrosiers, Pierre Bertrand, Michel Rivard, Robert Léger, Réal Desrosiers.

Artists from way, way back to way, way out

La Bolduc (Mary Travers, 1894-1941)
Brought songs of daily Quebec life in the 1930s to radio-dominated by U.S. styles in songs like Le Commerçant des rues, L'Enfant volé and Les Cinq Jumelles.

Félix Leclerc (1914-1988)
His first record in France, 1951's Chante ses derniers succès sur disque, made him an icon at home.

Claude Léveillé (1932 -)
A songwriter pianist (Prédéric), he was the most sophisticated Quebecer to play the French music game.

Gilles Vigneault (1928 -):
Mon pays (c'est l'hiver) and Gens du pays say it all for Quebec chanson's éminence grise.

Pauline Julien (1928-98)
The most fiery interpreter of Quebec chanson in the early days; try Pauline Julien chante Raymond Lévesque (1965, Gamma)

Robert Charlebois (1945 -)
The man who electrified Quebec chanson with rock and joual (Lindsberg, California, Les Ailes d'un ange) in the late 1960s.

Jean-Pierre Ferland (1934 -)
The crooner whose slick concept album Jaune (1970) is iconic for Quebec can-do.

Diane Dufresne (1944 -)
Her brassy sex appeal gave Quebec rock a diva attitude with 1972's Tiens toé ben, j'arrête, followed by A part de ça, j'me sens bien.

Beau Dommage (Michel Rivard, 1954)
Picture-postcard visions of 1970s effervescence in Montreal, Quebec, from the opening of the 1974 debut.

Harmonium, (Serge Fiori, 1952)
Dreamy hippie jazz-soft rock served as a magic carpet ride for young Quebec nationalists via 1975's Si on avait besoin d'une cinquième saison.

Richard Desjardins (1948 -)
Fabulist, satirist and environmentalist from Abitibi whose second CD, Tu m'aimes-tu (1990), is most often cited among today's songwriters.

Les Colocs (André Fortin, 1962-2000)
Madcaps who kept the spirit alive during the barren 1980s, before Fortin took his life.

Les Cowboys Fringants (formed 1997)
The first alt group (and independan-tistes) to become Quebec's most popular band, inspiring the likes of Les Trois Accords. Break Syndical and La grand messe are CD talismans.

Loco Locass (formed 1996)
Biz, Chafik and Batlam match their acerbic/aggressive view of independence with supreme hip-hop artistry in the 2004 CD Amour Oral.

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Québécois anthems over the years

Moi mes souliers, Félix Leclerc, 1951

Quand les hommes vivront d'amour, Raymond Lévesque, 1956

Mon Pays, Gilles Vigneault, 1964

Lindberg, Robert Charlebois (with Claude Péloquin), 1968

Nous sommes Québécois, La révolution française (Tony Roman), 1969

Entre deux joints, Robert Charlebois (with Pierre Bourgault), 1971

Caline de blues, Offenbach, 1971

J'entends frapper, Michel Pagliaro, 1972

Je suis cool, Gilles Valiquette, 1973

La maudite machine, Octobre, 1973

La complainte du phoque en Alaska, Beau Dommage, 1974

Un musicien parmi tant d'autres, Harmonium, 1974

Gens du pays, Vigneault, 1975

Je reviendrai à Montréal, Charlebois, 1976

Les Yankees, Richard Desjardins, 1988

La rue principale, Les Colocs

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Michel Pagliaro was responsible for the 1972 anthem J'entends frapper.

(André Fortin, 1992)

En berne, Les Cowboys Fringants (Jean-François Pauzé), 2002

Libérez-nous des Libéraux, Loco Locass (Batlam-Biz-Chafik), 2004

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